

To Be a Lady

To Be a Lady

Jessie Clever



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For Ms. Mohnhey

Contents

To Be a Lady

Ready For More?

Also by Jessie Clever

About the Author

To Be a Lady

London

March 1833

Richard Black, the Duke of Lofton, died peacefully in his bed. It was a Tuesday, as unremarkable as any other Tuesday, and he had gone to bed as he had any other Tuesday for the whole of his eighty-three years. It was only as dawn broke through the curtains that his wife, Jane, found him gone when she woke beside his cold body.

His colleagues and friends had all remarked on such a virtuous end to a life lived in constant pursuit of death. For in his work with the War Office, Richard Black had more than once traveled into the vicinity of death, caring not for the safety of his person but for the safety of an entire nation. To have death finally come when one had lived a life as full as it was wide, having escaped attempt after attempt on his life by nefarious traitors and the like, it was a rather remarkable feat and oft mentioned at the clubs by those that survived him and admired him.

His funeral was quite the spectacle with everyone in attendance including the Earl Grey. It was rumored even Peel would have appeared if he had been in the country at the time. As it was, St. Paul's ran over with the respectable and noble, the pews crammed with the latest in mourning fashions. The people were all there to see the great Richard Black, the Duke of Lofton, celebrated spy for the War Office, and in his later years, tremendous supporter of the reform acts sweeping through the House of Lords, laid to rest.

It was an exultant affair for all that those types of things could be. His life was carefully articulated by his sons, each milestone given its due. His achievements were itemized in detail and revered with exuberance by Lord Crawley, a man simply referred to as exemplary in his work alongside Lofton at the War Office.

As Richard Black's merits rang through the dome of St. Paul's, the attendees all bowed their heads, absorbing the passage of time, reflecting on their own life's achievements or lack thereof, and all pondered on the greatness of the man they had lost.

All except one, that is.

One slight head bent not in reflection but in fear.

Fear of the days ahead. Fear of the unknown.

Fear of not being able to keep the last promise she made to her

grandfather.

* * *

"Something has you more agitated than a mistress who's lost her protector," her grandmother said as the carriage bumped them along towards the College.

Jane turned her head away from the window where she had been arduously doing anything but looking at her grandmother. "Grandmother!" she said now, her voice pitched with just enough accusation to likely sound as disingenuous to everyone else as it did to her.

Her grandmother raised a single eyebrow.

At the age of two and eighty, her grandmother and namesake, Jane Black, the dowager Duchess of Lofton, wore her mourning colors with refined beauty. She was still quite a force in the *ton*, and Jane's admonishment of her grandmother would be as effective as Grey telling King William to abdicate the throne.

"Yes, I see how I gave myself away there," Jane admitted, turning away from her grandmother once more to the window and the passing scenery beyond.

"Well, as you have so willingly shown your hand, what is it that has you so distracted this morning?"

Jane fidgeted with the folds of her own mourning gown, adjusting the waist as it bit into her side.

"There is nothing at all amiss, Grandmother," Jane said. "I'm not sure why we are even following this line of conversation."

It had been three weeks since her grandfather's funeral and four since Jane's world had been turned upside down. Until four weeks ago, she had had her entire life planned out to the very last detail according to what could be expected of the eldest daughter of a gentleman farmer. It had been the usual things. Finding a husband, marrying said husband, having children, and running a household. It sounded rather drab when she thought about it in a litany such as that, but with a former housekeeper as her mother, Jane was rather well educated on the keeping of house accounts, the creation of menus, and the management of servants. At Mable Manor, her father had been generous in his review of the ledgers with his daughter, teaching her what a prosperous farm should look like in the form of neat columns of numbers. She liked to think of herself as the future domestic Nelson although she never told anyone of the like.

Jane was so unlike her cousins and even her own siblings when it came to that. Her elder brother was a fine example. Scampering about London in all the slums and brothels and hells and what else there

was, seeking to maintain order and peace. Jane wasn't even sure of all the proper names for the places Samuel went or what it was he was even called. She recalled hearing something on the matter from her Uncle Alec, something about another reform bill, but gad, how the whole thing bored her. Give her a nice thick ledger, and she would be happy for hours.

But dancing freely within this sphere of future domestic heaven, her world had come crashing down on her like a juicy scandal during a debutante's first season. And all from a softly spoken plea from a man she admired nearly as much as she admired her own father.

Take care of Jane.

Her grandfather's voice seemed to echo in her mind, and she thought perhaps if she just tilted her head to one side, she could bang on the opposite ear and dispel the words like water trapped in her eardrum after a swim in the creek at Mable Manor.

She knew her grandfather had not been speaking of her. It often got confusing when someone referred to Jane with the entire family gathered, but as Jane had grown up, the family had started to call the elder Jane, Grandmother, and the confusion had subsided somewhat. So that day, sitting next to her grandfather in the gardens of Lofton House in London, Jane had known precisely about whom he had spoken.

Oh, he had not referred to her as Grandmother for it would have been unnecessary. While being decidedly different in her lack of attraction to the family business of spying and peacekeeping, Jane was also prone to keeping her mouth shut and her ears open. Rather unlike the other Blacks but very much like her mother, Eleanora. It was another quality she had admired in herself.

Until that very moment, that is.

Take care of Jane.

Jane had expected her grandfather to make such a request of one of his grandchildren. He had been getting on in years, and he had slowed considerably there at the end. He had always been honest about mortality, and from the stories she had heard told about his adventures with the War Office, Jane was certain her grandfather had an acquaintance, of sorts, with death. So when the time came, she was certain he would ask Samuel, the peacekeeper, or Ashley, the future Duke of Lofton, to care for Jane. Even one of his sons would have been a suitable choice.

But it had been Jane.

Jane of all people. The queen of domesticity and all things bland.

Why had it been her?

Why had such a burden been lain at her feet?

For it was a burden. She was certain that when other grandparents

asked a young one to look after a soul left behind it was merely a passing occasion, a routine action a person committed in one's doddering years as if it were another item to check off of one's list. But it wasn't the same when the person she was to care for was Jane Black, the dowager Duchess of Lofton. For as many stories as she had heard about her grandfather, there were thrice as many about Jane.

Her grandfather had been serious when he had made his request, when he had begged Jane to look after her grandmother. For no one could get into as much trouble with so little effort as the dowager Duchess of Lofton.

Jane swallowed, her eyes scrupulously studying the architecture of passing buildings. She didn't even know where they were at this point or where it was that she was going. For four weeks she had been following her grandmother about from one engagement to the next. It was only a matter of time before someone noticed that boring, domestic Jane had suddenly taken an interest in London life.

At least the London life that revolved around her eighty-two year old grandmother.

Perhaps that was the reason no one had said anything until then, and then when the matter was spoken of, it should be the dowager herself to question it.

"Is it love?"

Jane swung her head around again, her eyes nearly falling from their sockets. "Grandmother!" she said once more, this time with quite a bit more honesty.

"Oh, drat, it isn't then," the dowager said. "That at least would have been interesting."

Jane looked over at her grandmother, a muscle twitching above her eye as she did so.

"It's a pity you decided to postpone your season," the dowager said then. "You would have made a stunning debut."

It wasn't common for someone in Jane's position to even have a season, but as her father was the son of a duke, albeit illegitimate, she was afforded luxuries that others in her class were not. Her coming out was to have transpired this year. Her grandmother had already taken her around to purchase the necessary gowns, gloves, hats, and assorted frippery. All of which gave Jane zero amusement.

Grandfather had died then, and her season was postponed as the family entered the respectable mourning period. But while others said *postponed*, Jane secretly hoped the thing would never come to light again. It wasn't something that she would voice. For if she did, others would find it peculiar that a woman such as she, so bent on managing a household, would shun the very thing that would aid her in acquiring such a position. Namely, that of securing a husband.

But the truth of it was she had already found herself a husband.

It was only a matter of time before he would ask for her hand, and then all would be well. He was the son of a country baron. Perfectly respectable and nice enough. There was no need for all the fuss of a London season really.

At least, that had been her plan until her grandfather had made her swear to the promise that would tear all of her plans to pieces.

Jane looked at her grandmother who returned her gaze with cutting directness.

"It is love, actually," Jane said then.

Why not distract her grandmother with the secret she had been keeping for so long?

"I'll believe that as soon as I'll believe young Samuel would take a safe job as a clerk in an office somewhere," her grandmother returned.

Jane sighed.

Yes, the promise she had made to her grandfather was simply disastrous.

* * *

"I'll trade you."

Nathan looked up, unaware anyone had entered the library, to find his brother sauntering over to the sofa Nathan had collapsed on earlier that morning. "Trade me?" he said, observing his brother's crumpled waistcoat and loosened cravat.

It was hardly past nine in the morning and already his brother was a discordant mess. Nathan pitied Alec's valet for what was surely the hundredth time since his brother had taken the man on.

"I'll give you the dukedom to hear whatever it is that has brought such a gloomy look to your face."

Nathan frowned.

"Pardon me," Alec said. "Gloomier."

Nathan wanted to roll his eyes but instead settled for turning his gaze to the smoldering flames in the hearth.

"I'm concerned about postponing Jane's season," Nathan said.

Alec snorted. "I'd love to find reason to postpone Emily's debut next year. The girl is going to give her mother apoplexy if she hasn't already."

Nathan looked quickly at Alec. "Emily?" he asked, referring to Alec's eldest child.

Alec nodded, slumping down in his seat, wrinkling his coat as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Sarah says she caught Emily flirting with the boy who delivers our post."

Nathan raised an eyebrow. "That seems rather beneath Emily," Nathan said. "As the daughter of a now duke, her prospects should be numerous."

Alec dropped his hand. "When Sarah confronted her, Emily said it was practice."

Both eyebrows went up at that. "Dear God," he said. "You are in for it."

Alec nodded. "That's why the option to postpone her season sounds so wondrous."

Nathan shook his head. "Jane is just the opposite. If she hadn't taken such an interest in the breeding of horses, I would swear she wasn't even aware that there was an opposite sex."

Alec frowned. "Do you think she'll end up a spinster?"

Nathan shrugged. "It's not that I want her out of the house," he said. "Quite the contrary. I'd love to keep all of my children under one roof. But—" He stopped, searching for the right words. "I don't want my children to miss the experience of what Nora and I have." He looked over to his brother. "Does that make sense?"

Alec nodded. "It's the hope and dream I have for each of my children." He paused. "Except Emily. I'm sending her to a convent."

Nathan smiled, feeling his mood lift for the first time since he and Nora had made the decision to postpone Jane's season. He stared at his brother, noticing the splashes of gray in his dark hair for the first time, the deep lines around his eyes and mouth.

He looked just like their father, as Nathan was sure others would say about himself. He felt the deep stabbing pain again, the one that had come with such familiarity and frequency since his father had passed. But with the pain came a wave of happiness.

They had been lucky.

They could have lost their father, husband and grandfather on any number of missions he had carried out for the War Office in his lifetime. But instead Richard had bested them all, slipping away peacefully in his sleep.

Nathan reached out, grabbing his brother's shoulder in a tight grip.

Alec looked up with a lazy glance from the fire, a weak smile coming to his lips.

"I know what you mean, brother," Alec said.

Sitting there in the stillness of Lofton House, his hand on his little brother's shoulder, Nathan had never felt such responsibility, even though he did not carry the title of duke.

A soft knock came at the door, and Nathan looked up as his wife entered the room.

"Uh oh," Nathan said, standing.

Nora had an ear firmly pinched in each of her hands as she

dragged her niece and nephew, Alec's youngest children, through the door. Michael and Madeline were all of twelve years old, but they had twice the scheming capabilities of their father and uncle. Nathan shook his head at them before Nora could even pronounce their sins.

Alec threw his head against the back of the sofa in utter defeat, forcing Nathan to stifle a laugh.

"Please, Father," Michael said, his voice soft and coaxing. "Don't send us to Mother."

Madeline squirmed under Nora's grip. "Please, Father," she joined in on her brother's plea.

Nathan covered his mouth with his hand, feeling that rush of relief once more. He may have felt guilt and worry over postponing Jane's season, but none of his children were as demanding as Alec's twins.

Alec stood with a slap to his thighs, bouncing around to face Nora and her captives. "What is it this time?" Alec said, pressing his hands together as if he were embarking on a new project.

"They painted the kitchen cat with whitewash and set it loose through the laundry on the line."

A snort escaped before Nathan could stop it, and he had to turn toward the fire to hide his amusement. It wouldn't do to give the twins any encouragement.

"Incredible," Alec murmured.

Nathan turned his head enough to see Alec shake his, and then-

"Whitewashed cats are definitely your mother's area of expertise."

"No!" came the twin cries of despair, and Nathan turned his head back around to the fireplace, his hand covering his smile.

He heard Alec's footsteps as he presumably made his way over to the twins.

"I'll be sure she doesn't cut off both of your heads, but beyond that, I promise nothing."

There was a chorus of excuses and apologies, footsteps and shuffling, before the library door clicked shut, and the room was silent once more. Nathan turned to find Nora standing where she had been, her arms hanging loose at her sides.

"Is it wrong that I'm glad we never had children like that?"

Nathan smiled. "I was thinking nearly the same thing."

He held out his arms, and Nora walked toward him, slipping into his embrace as she had done so many times before.

"We did all right, didn't we?" she said, her voice soft, her arms tight about him.

The feel of her against him, the touch of her fingers against his back, had his misgivings nearly vanishing.

"We did all right, I think," he said. "Although, I think we still have a little way to go with Elizabeth," he said, thinking of their youngest

daughter who at fourteen was just learning the demands that would be required of her as a wife and mother one day and finding little of interest in either option.

Nora laughed against his chest.

"I've resigned myself to handing Elizabeth over to the War Office when the time comes."

Nathan laughed, too. "It is inevitable, my love," he said.

* * *

Jane had listened to exactly none of the lecture. Her mind raced with the implications of trying to protect her bold, courageous, defiant grandmother. The woman was eighty-two years old. This shouldn't have been a daunting prospect. But Grandmother was likely to outlive them all. Jane envisioned the years stretching out before her, each one more of a challenge than the last when it came to protecting her charge.

And what if she failed?

God, she couldn't fail. She just couldn't. Her grandfather's voice rang loudly in her head, and for a moment, she wanted desperately to be sitting at her father's desk at Mable Manor, running her finger down the neat columns of his account books.

"Bored you as well, huh?"

Jane looked up to see her grandmother had risen, her walking cane already in one hand. She stood abruptly, nearly tripping over her own seat.

"I cannot say that it was riveting in the least," she decided to say as she had heard none of the lecture whatsoever.

"Lady Bellentine has invited us for tea this afternoon," Grandmother said as they made their way carefully through the mass leaving the lecture hall.

Jane stumbled, putting out her hand to catch the back of the row of seats beside her.

"Tea?"

Grandmother turned, a wary eye cast in Jane's direction. "Yes, just tea. Surely it isn't all that exciting."

Jane straightened, ensuring her feet were securely on the ground before she moved forward. Tea had never seemed more wrought with danger in her life. "Tea sounds lovely."

They had made their way to the entrance hall, and people gathered in clusters discussing the topic or passing parting pleasantries. Jane reached forward, taking her grandmother's elbow as she guided the woman toward the door. But when her grandmother suddenly stopped, Jane pitched forward, once more stumbling indelicately.

“What has gotten into you?” Grandmother asked, her brow furrowed.

Jane looked down at her feet, the toes of her shoes hardly visible beneath her skirts. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she straightened her shoulders with a casual shrug. “Nothing,” she said, shaking her head blithely. “It’s just crowded, and I didn’t want you to get...jostled.”

The dowager Duchess of Lofton was not one to be jostled.

Ever.

Jane knew it and felt ten times the fool.

“You’ll need to tell me what it is that’s bothering you sooner or later, young woman,” her grandmother said, her tone unyielding.

Jane trembled, the feeling so slight, she was sure no one saw it. For a moment, she wondered what had happened to her younger self. The one who had so voraciously consumed the stories of her grandparents’ missions for the War Office, of travel to far off places, of thwarting the enemy. The younger Jane had yearned for such stories, and once upon a time, she may have even wished to be a spy herself.

But Jane had grown up and in the growing up, had likely lost that curiosity. Now she clutched at her grandmother’s elbow like an overwrought mother to a toddler’s hand, believing that if she just touched the person for whom she worried, all would be well.

Jane knew better than that.

Jane knew what her grandfather had meant with his demand.

Take care of Jane.

Not for the first time did she wonder why her grandfather had chosen her. Even Emily would have been a better choice.

Grandmother continued to glare at her as if her mere gaze could wrench the truth from Jane. But Jane only stood there as people filed out of the hall around them. Finally, Grandmother seemed to give up and turned in the direction of the door. Jane followed, her shoulders back and head up as she took in the goings on around them.

It was a rather fashionable set at this lecture. Jane had attended several with her grandmother before, and that had not always been the case. She took a measure of relief in that. Surely a member of the fashionable sect wouldn’t try anything on a grandmother.

Reaching the outer doors, Jane thought that the very reason for her grandfather’s request. It would seem unlikely that anyone would hurt Grandmother as the woman was so old and fading, but as her grandmother took the stairs without showing any sign of fading whatsoever, Jane knew it to be a false assumption. Perhaps *others* would think Grandmother was fading, but anyone who knew her as the great spy for the War Office would understand differently. That was why unease rode through her like a highwayman through the

night, unobserved but ever present.

They reached the pavement in front of the lecture hall, and Grandmother paused, looking about for the Lofton carriage. Jane spied it a few carriages down the lane, clogged in the mess of traffic exiting the College.

"It's just there, Grandmother," Jane said, gesturing discreetly with her head. "Would you care to walk?"

As soon she removed her grandmother from a situation so full of potential disaster, Jane was certain she would feel much calmer. They pushed through the crowd, exchanging pleasantries when they encountered someone of acquaintance. It was only a matter of minutes before they reached the section of pavement where the Lofton carriage waited.

Jane peered through the crowd of people to see the tiger jump from the back of the carriage, its livery of Lofton colors clear through the throng. Grandmother went in front of her, sharing a word with a woman passing from the opposite direction. Jane watched her grandmother smile and give a discreet wave in greeting, but as her eyes traveled to her grandmother's wave, her gaze caught that of another's in the crowd.

The man was rather tall, standing a full head above the crowd. His hair was dark and unfashionably long, curling about his collar as it peeked out from under the brim of his hat. She couldn't see his eyes directly, as the shadow cast from the hat prevented it, but she could feel the heat of his gaze as her heart began to pound. The crowd shifted, and she saw more of him. Austere black clothing, from cravat to Hessians. The clothing appeared well tailored and well cared for, but still, the stranger continued to stare.

Grandmother moved toward the Lofton carriage and thus toward this man who watched them so carefully. Now Jane could make out the features of his lower face, strong chin with a cleft, dark stubble along his jaw, and-

She faltered in her step, her hands going out to latch onto her Grandmother.

A jagged, sinister scar ran down the center of his right cheek, stretching nearly to his jaw. Jane heard herself gasp as she saw it, and then the stranger was moving. Moving forward, moving toward them, and Jane wondered for a moment if he had heard her outburst.

Jane shoved her grandmother, pushing the woman toward the carriage. The tiger had the door open, and Jane propelled her grandmother into the vehicle, throwing herself in behind her. The tiger snapped the door shut, and within moments, the carriage began to rock with movement.

Jane scrambled on the bench as her ungraceful entrance to the

conveyance had thrown her off balance, and the pronounced rocking kept her so. But she managed to make the window in time to see the stranger burst onto the street, his eyes watching them roll away.

His head had lifted, and she could see plainly now that his eyes were a terrible, dark grey. Jane couldn't move her gaze from his even as the distance between them grew. She swallowed, her unease roaring to a boil within her.

"It was you then," Grandmother said from the opposite side of the vehicle.

Jane swung about, startled at the sudden noise in the carriage. She straightened, rubbing her damp palms against the skirts of her dress. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, her voice wobbly as her heart stampeded in her chest.

"It was you," her grandmother said. "Richard asked you to take care of me."

* * *

Jane watched her granddaughter's mouth fall open rather indelicately but waved off the show of surprise with a flip of her wrist.

"Do not be so condescending, my dear," Jane said. "I knew he would ask one of the grandchildren, and I'm not entirely surprised he asked you."

Young Jane blinked at her, her soft brown eyes so innocent and open. Jane sighed, feeling every one of her eighty-two years. Her granddaughter was so impossibly young. Her complexion so clear and pale, like precious ivory. Her mannerisms so untouched by the world around her. Jane wondered if she had ever been so naive and thought perhaps once she had. But it would have been long ago, before her first marriage.

Jane closed her eyes on the memories, a whole lifetime sweeping before her like a spooked horse. So many unexpected things, so many things she had never planned for, and still, so many more to come. She opened her eyes, seeing her granddaughter unchanged.

"I knew he wouldn't leave me to my own accord," she said, hoping to ease the look of panic dancing across Young Jane's features. "Even from the grave, he's trying to protect me."

She gave a smile, but she felt how weak it was, hardly lifting the corners of her mouth. It wasn't Richard's death that so weighed on her. It was the absence left by his death that gave her pause. The innumerable times she turned, a question poised on her lips, expecting to find him sitting across from her. The emptiness beside her in the bed at night, the lack of warmth from his body. The nothingness that consumed her now that her husband was gone.

Once before she had mourned him. Once before she had thought him gone from this world only to find sweet relief in being proven wrong. But that had been long ago, and this time, she had had his body there to confirm her worst fears. She had always known she would wake up one morning to find him gone from her. Why it was that she had felt so certain he would go before her she wasn't sure. Perhaps it was because he had always taken care of her in his own quiet way, and why should he not go forth in death to prepare the way for her? Another small smile played at her lips at the thought. It would be so like Richard to do just so.

But that did not help with the problem of Young Jane before her. "What did he make you promise exactly?"

Young Jane blinked at her before moving her mouth with no sound emerging. Jane rolled her eyes.

"Oh, for the love of King William, out with it," she said. "It's not as if his ghost will haunt you if you tell me what it is he said."

"I fear that is precisely what will happen," Young Jane nearly whispered.

Jane laughed then, the sound unexpected and abrupt in the close space of the carriage. "I suppose you are right, my dear," she said. "But perhaps it will be all right if we just keep it between the two of us."

Young Jane shook her head. "He said I wasn't to tell anyone."

Jane sat up a little straighter. "Is that so?" she asked. "Why is that?"

Young Jane shook her head. "I don't know, Grandmother," she said. "I didn't question him."

No one ever did question Richard, in life and now apparently in death as well. She'd ring his neck when she met him on the other side.

"I see," Jane said. "And this now leads us to mad dashes into carriages?"

Young Jane swallowed so loudly it pulsed through the carriage. "I'm terribly sorry, Grandmother," she said. "It's just that I—"

Jane waved her off. "I was likely in some sort of danger, wasn't I?"

Young Jane sat unmoving, her eyes wide with apprehension. Jane frowned.

"Well, there's nothing to be done of it, is there?" she said. "I would hazard a guess that you are not likely to relax your guard if I asked you to."

Young Jane shook her head so quickly Jane feared the young woman would hurt herself.

"I thought not," she said and turned to look out the window, her thoughts a jumbled knot.

It was one thing to lose one's husband, the love of one's entire life.

It was quite another to have said love assign one a bodyguard to be ever present upon his death. She would definitely be ringing his neck when next she saw him.

"Grandmother?" Young Jane said, her voice so weak Jane looked quickly to the opposite bench.

"What is it, dear?" she asked. "Besides the obvious that is." Here she gestured in general to Young Jane's clenched hands and wide eyes.

"Why did Grandfather pick me?" Young Jane said.

Jane blinked at her, the question rather unexpected. "You mean you don't know?"

The young woman shook her head, and Jane felt another sigh blossom on her lips. Jane leaned forward, drawing Young Jane's hands into her own, smoothing out the tense muscles in the young woman's fingers.

"I was a very old woman when you were born, Jane," she said. "And I had been married to your grandfather for more than thirty years. But until I held you in my arms, I had never completely felt as if we were all a family."

Young Jane blinked at her, and Jane felt the beginnings of tears in her eyes.

"It was you, Jane," she said. "Watching you grow inside your mother, being there for your birth, and holding you in my arms. You were the one to complete this family." Young Jane's hands began to twitch in her own, and Jane knew they were both perilously close to crying. She smiled. "You are the only one I would ever listen to," she said, her smile growing wider. "And your grandfather knew it."

* * *

Jane walked arm and arm with her grandmother through the door of Lofton House, feeling a measure of relief that she had not felt in some time. Although her grandfather's promise still hung on her like chains, she no longer worried about what she could not control, that being her grandmother.

"I'll just freshen up, and then we may leave for Lady Bellentine's," Grandmother called as she made her way up the front staircase.

Jane handed her things to the footman who had come to the door before she followed her grandmother above stairs. She was passing the second floor landing when she saw her mother and father emerge from the library. A smile came to her lips at the sight of them, heads bent together.

Her parents were getting on in years. Jane knew that, but when she saw them like this, so close after so many years, she couldn't help

but smile, thinking of them as young and in love. She felt more than understood what her grandmother had told her in the carriage earlier. They were a family. Grandfather and Grandmother, Uncle Alec and Aunt Sarah, and all the smatterings of grandchildren. The circle just continued, and it would continue long after Jane had come and gone.

It was with a much lighter heart that she left Lofton House with Grandmother nearly an hour later to make the short walk to Lady Bellentine's town house. Jane wasn't certain how much longer her parents planned on staying in town. Surely Father would want to return to Mable Manor for the planting, and Jane had always been there to survey the fields with him. She looked quickly at her grandmother, wondering for a fleeting moment what she would do when the time came.

Would she leave Mable Manor to spend the foreseeable future with her grandmother, desperately trying to keep the last promise she had made to her grandfather? Her chest tightened at the thought of not being there for the planting and harvesting at Mable Manor. Of not helping her father with the accounts. Of not seeing that the sheep were rounded and sheared at the appropriate time. Of not-

She forcibly stopped the unending chorus in her head, seeking that momentary lightness she had felt only moments ago.

"You're thinking very deep thoughts again," Grandmother said beside her.

Jane looked over at the older woman, her face in shadow beneath the rim of her hat. The day was warm for early spring, and Jane thought her grandmother looked livelier than she had in the past few weeks. Perhaps the change in weather would do her good.

Jane shrugged then in response to her grandmother's words. "I was just thinking of when Father planned to return to Mable Manor."

They turned at the next crossroad, heading away from the park as they made their way deeper into Mayfair.

"Will you go with him?" Grandmother asked. "You're usually there for the planting."

Jane nodded, her eyes scanning the pavement before them. "Perhaps," she said, but even she could hear the weakness of her conviction.

The sidewalks were rather crowded at this hour as fashionable men and women made their way about, coming and going from social calls, or as Jane and her grandmother were, coming and going from tea. Jane's eyes made their way about the various faces, having not forgotten that strange man at the lecture hall with the hideous scar down his face. She shivered despite the sunshine and continued scanning the faces.

Perhaps it was because she was so absorbed that she didn't hear

the footsteps behind them, didn't know there was anything amiss until the hand closed over her shoulder. She was spun about so quickly her reticule fell from her wrist as her outstretched hand pushed her grandmother away from the melee. She saw Grandmother pitch forward, her body falling against the decorative railing of one of the townhouses that lined the street.

Jane's fists were raised, ready to both protect her core and strike out when necessary. For although she loved ledgers, her brother, Samuel, had not let her leave Lofton House without knowing how to throw a sound punch. When her eyes adjusted to her attackers, the breath caught in her throat. There were two of them, and neither was the man with the scar. But even more puzzling were their words.

"This ain't the right one," said the thug on her left.

Both men were ostensibly from a lower class, covered in filth and muck, their hair greasy and lank about their unshaven faces. One man was rather tall and thin while the other was short and barrel-chested. It was the tall man that held her in his iron grip, his mangled hands dirtying her gown.

She stared at the shorter man though, the one who had so blatantly indicated she was not the person they sought. But before she could wrest a hand free to strike, her attackers were suddenly gone as a man seemed to fly through the air, knocking the ruffians away from her and to the ground.

Jane blinked, staring at the space where only moments before her attackers had stood. She turned at a touch against her elbow to find Grandmother standing there, her hat askew but otherwise looking completely unfazed, holding out Jane's forgotten reticule in one hand.

"I'll say," she said. "Did you see the chap jump from that carriage?"

Jane swung her head about realizing for the first time that a carriage had pulled up alongside them. She didn't recognize its emblem or colors but at a shout of anguish, she turned back to the chaos before her on the pavement.

Their seeming rescuer had tossed the barrel-chested man over one of the decorative stonewalls of a nearby townhouse and was preceding to pummel the tall man with a round of fisticuffs to the man's chest. Before she could register more, their rescuer had turned, sweeping both of them into the carriage that had stopped. The vehicle was moving before Jane could right herself enough to see who it was that had saved them and to offer her thanks.

But when she pushed her fallen hat out of her eyes, the very breath stopped in her lungs as her eyes met the stormy gaze of the man from the lecture hall.

"It's you," Jane whispered indelicately.

The man made no sign of emotion. He merely tipped his head in her direction. "Miss Black," he said before nodding at Grandmother. "Dowager."

Jane looked at Grandmother, who smiled warmly at the man opposite. "Please, with all this nonsense, Lady Jane is fine," she said. "Wherever did you learn a trick like that?"

The man's expression hardened if that were at all possible. "Fighting in India and Greece, I'm afraid," he said.

Grandmother's face sobered. "Well, then I must thank you for your service to your country."

"I can say the same to you, Lady Jane," he said.

Jane sat very still, the carriage bouncing about her as she listened to this absurdly mundane conversation happening around her. Who was this man who seemed to be dogging their every step? Who was he to play the role of hero? Not that she didn't appreciate such a service, but really, what nerve.

"I beg your pardon," she interrupted the exchange of gratitude.

"Yes, Miss Black," he said turning to her. "I apologize for the abrupt nature of my intrusion, but it seems a matter has come to light that required our attention."

"Whose attention?" Jane asked.

"That of the Metropolitan Police Force, but it may go higher than that," he said. "You can never quite tell with these things."

Jane blinked at him. "The Metropolitan what?"

The carriage lurched to a halt so unexpectedly, Jane pitched forward and would have landed on the floor of the carriage had her rescuer not been close enough to catch her. His hands caught her upper arms, stopping her near certain collision. She raised her head to find him only inches away, his warm breath, smelling faintly of coffee, rippling over her skin. She shivered, the response so involuntary and uncommon, she couldn't stop it.

His eyes were a clear grey at this distance, almost smoky and... alluring. His scar ran from just beneath the one eye to his jaw, and from here, it looked not nearly as hideous. It looked as if it had been rather neatly sewn, in fact, which had her backing up to study him.

That was until she saw him staring back at her.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he said. "Women often find my scar disagreeable."

She shook her head at his words, studying the line of healed flesh. "It's not that, sir," she said. "But rather-" she paused, not knowing how to word her question. "Did you sew that yourself?"

She felt the blush spring to her face as soon as the words left her lips, and she cast her gaze downward, appalled at her forward behavior. It was no business of hers whether he had been the one to close the wound or some other soldier in the field, for likely that was where the wound had occurred. But then his finger was pushing her chin up, his touch sparking a fire that flashed down the length of her, pooling in her tightened stomach.

He was smiling.

It was a small smile, so foreign to the hard expression she had come to know, but it was a smile no less. "I did sew it myself," he said.

Jane opened her mouth to say something surely, but her words were prevented when the door to the carriage flew open. Only able to move her eyes in the direction of the now open door as the mysterious rescuer still held her chin in his grip, Jane felt the air seize in her lungs once more.

"Care to explain this, Jane?" Her brother, Samuel, said, standing tall on the pavement, his fists clenched at his hips, his greatcoat swinging as crowds of people passed behind him on the pavement.

"I think he means you, dear," Grandmother whispered, and Jane felt all sense of relief vanish.

* * *

"Marquess of what?"

"Evanshire," Samuel said absently, his head bent to the paperwork strewn across the desk before him.

They had been ushered out of the carriage and into the commission of this part of London's Metropolitan Police Force and from there, ensconced in what appeared to be Samuel's office within the building. Jane tried desperately to look only at her brother, her mind wrestling with the reality that the young man who used to carry her about on his shoulders was now a constable or some such thing.

Her grandmother was in no way as discreet as she stood leaning on her cane, peering through the crack left by the open door at the marquess in the room beyond.

"Marquess of Evanshire, Jane," she said. "You could do a lot worse."

At that, Jane gave up the pretense of disinterest, turning her head to her grandmother.

"There is no cause for such a judgement," she said. "I've not even had my first season."

Grandmother raised an eyebrow.

"I didn't say it was in the romantic sense," her grandmother

returned. "I was merely suggesting that as a rescuer, he is a rather fine choice."

Jane's face heated with her blush, her gaze going back to her brother.

"Was this the first such occurrence?" Samuel asked, and Jane blinked at him. He gestured with some correspondence in his hand. "Attempted kidnapping. Was this the first occurrence?"

Jane heard her grandmother's sharp intake of air and very much felt the impulse to do the same.

"Kidnapping?" her grandmother said before Jane could say anything at all.

Samuel nodded, his expression more grim than Jane had ever seen it. "We've been gathering some intelligence on the matter. It appears since Grandfather's death, certain parties are eager to test the defenses of the Black family."

Grandmother stomped forward, her cane ricocheting like gunfire through the room. "I beg your pardon," she seethed, her body straightening as if it did not carry the weight of eighty-odd years.

Samuel did not flinch. "We must determine how secure the Black family is," Samuel said and turned to Jane. "Was this the first time someone has tried to kidnap you?"

"Yes," Jane answered.

"Are you sure?" Samuel asked.

"I should hope so," Jane said. "If I've missed previous attempts, I should have concern for my mental abilities."

The door opened then admitting the Marquess of Evanshire, her mysterious gentleman with the smoky gaze. Jane looked everywhere in the room but at him.

"We've reports in from the others, Sam," the marquess said. "No other attempts have been made."

"Reports?" Grandmother asked, watching as the marquess handed some papers to Samuel. Samuel ignored the question until Grandmother struck the papers from his hand with a well-placed lash of her cane. Samuel cast her a sardonic look.

"I'm having the entire family watched," he said. "Our hope is to catch the perpetrators in the act. However, it is my own mistake in thinking they wouldn't go after you, Grandmother."

Grandmother straightened again. "Is it because I'm old?"

"Yes," Samuel said without attempting to soften the blow.

"Well, you're right," Grandmother said. "I am old, and apparently, not worth abducting." Grandmother gestured with her cane. "It was Young Jane they were after."

Jane swallowed, her promise to her grandfather completely leaving her head, as her own safety came into question. But then she paused.

“No,” she said. “It’s not me.” The marquess looked at her now, his gaze burning into her. She swallowed for entirely different reasons. “They said I wasn’t the right one.”

Samuel turned to face her more directly. “I beg your pardon.”

Jane stood, unable to hold still any longer as fear and apprehension radiated through her. “When the taller man grabbed me, the shorter one said I wasn’t the right one.”

Samuel looked at the Marquess of Evanshire.

“Emily,” Grandmother whispered then, and the fear that had remained at a low boil erupted within Jane.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, her gaze darting involuntarily to the Marquess of Evanshire as her sudden fear for her cousin solidified within her.

“It appears we have an investigation on our hands, Sam,” the marquess said, his gaze not leaving hers.

Samuel nodded. “It was about time for the Blacks to get back into action.”

The marquess raised an eyebrow, his eyes finally breaking from her own.

“It’s a very long story, lad,” Grandmother said, shaking her head. “A very long story, indeed.” She looked to Jane, her gaze steady and sure. “And it looks like it’s about to get longer.”

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About the Author

Jessie decided to be a writer because the job of Indiana Jones was already filled.

Taking her history degree dangerously, Jessie tells the stories of courageous heroines, the men who dared to love them, and the world that tried to defeat them.

Jessie makes her home in the great state of New Hampshire where she lives with her husband and two very opinionated Basset hounds. For more, visit her website at jessieclever.com.